Sign Consumption in the 19th-Century Department Store: An Examination of Visual Merchandising in the Grand Emporiums (1846 – 1900)

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Introduction

The activity of window-shopping appears to be one of the most popular pastimes of contemporary consumer culture. With a seemingly endless repetition, consumers converge to city centres or giant suburban shopping malls to enjoy the visual delights of commodities staged in aesthetically appealing arrangements. In these contemporary sites of consumption, goods are rarely presented to extol their purpose or utility. Instead, visual merchandisers combine glass, chrome, fibreboard, and plastic to create miniature worlds for products. The goal of good visual merchandising is not only to create a display that is pleasing to the eye, but one that tells a story, providing a narrative for each commodity. A successful display captures the consumer, enticing them with representations of their dreams, aspirations, and desires. Who consumers want to be, or at least who the visual merchandisers think they should be, is portrayed in store windows that line inner city promenades or constructed on fixtures and shop fittings inside almost every retail centre (Ewen, 1988). In contemporary consumer culture, consumption does not just involve the acquisition of the basic requirements for life, but also contributes to the construction of our self and social identities.

When confronted by the dazzling displays of commodities contained in the mammoth new 'leisure orientated' suburban shopping malls it is sometimes assumed that advanced techniques of visual merchandising are particular to the contemporary or postmodern age (Shields, 1989; Bocock, 1993; Baudrillard, 1998; Jameson, 1991). However, far from being a phenomenon exclusive to the postmodern era, this paper will demonstrate that the deliberate staging of products in extraordinary arrangements developed gradually in retail institutions as early as the 18th century. By asserting that

complex forms of visual merchandising lead to the development of symbolic consumption in the 'modern' era this paper challenges conventual wisdom that postmodern forms of sign-consumption are exclusive to contemporary society. While some academics such as Ewen (1976; 1988; 1996) have highlighted the development of sophisticated forms of symbolic consumption in the early 20th century few have examined the possibility of its existence in earlier periods. In contrast, this paper will argue that sign-consumption and the related practices of identity construction through the deployment of symbolic commodities were vital components of 'modern' 19th-century society.

While the history of visual merchandising can be traced from early incarnations in the 18th century the evolution of visual display reached its zenith within in the massive department stores that emerged in cities like Paris, New York, and Philadelphia in the mid 19th century. It was in these early department stores that techniques taken from older institutions of presenting goods were refined and perfected. It is not surprising then, as an important development in consumption practices, that the early department stores became a subject of inquiry for researchers from fields such as sociology (Chaney, 1983; Laermans, 1993; Abelson, 1989; Corrigan, 1997; Reekie, 1992; 1993; Leach, 1984; Featherstone, 1991; Nava, 1997; Rappaport, 1996), cultural and literary studies (Bowlby, 1985; Williams, 1982; Bryson, 1994), and retail history (Pasdermadjian, 1954; Jeffreys, 1954; Ferry, 1960; Hower, 1943; Gibbons, 1926; Twyman, 1954; Hendrickson, 1979; Adburgham, 1981; Lancaster, 1995; Kingston, 1994; Crossick and Jaumain, 1999). In dealing with the manipulation of visual merchandising, sociologists and cultural theorists alike have tended to adopt a critical perspective. For neo-Marxists like Walter Benjamin[2] (1999) and Richard Sennett

(1977), and cultural theorists like Rosalind Williams (1982) the emporiums' use of visual merchandising transformed the 19th-century department stores into dream or fantasy worlds, a place of phantasmagoria, where false realities and fictional desires were sold by ingenious, yet dishonourable capitalists to mesmerised consumers. However, more recent inquires into visual merchandising, like those performed by Featherstone (1991), Leach (1984), and Laermans (1993) have contended that perspective proposed by critical theorists, who regarded the manipulation of visual merchandising as a constructor of fiction and fantasy, ignored the vital role played by symbolic consumption in the creation of self and social identities. In particular, Featherstone (1991) and Laermans (1993) argue the manipulation of visual merchandising conducted by the 19th-century department stores infused ordinary, mass-produced commodities with sign-values thus transforming the stores' mundane products into expressive and desirable commodity-signs (Baudrillard, 1996; 1998; 1981). Indeed, as Featherstone (1991: 85) and Laermans (1993: 94) point out consumption in the 19th century was essentially symbolic consumption. Unfortunately, Featherstone (1991) and Laermans (1993) explore this perspective only in passing. Although their acknowledgement that symbolic consumption existed in the 19th century is a significant contribution to the sociology of consumption, Featherstone (1991) and Laermans (1993) fail to fully develop their original and innovative argument. It is left for the reader to imagine how symbolic values were imparted onto everyday goods from the department store's wondrous displays.

This paper commences where Featherstone (1991) and Laermans' (1993) perspective ends. It will assert that the early department stores' manipulation of visual display did not falsify or abstract commodities from their true purpose or origin, as critical

theorists has previously argued, but instead that visual merchandising added three distinct symbolic qualities, wealth, mystery, and abundance. Moreover, how the managers of the early department stores constructed the sign values of opulence, exoticism, and excess through the manipulation of window and interior displays will be examined. Finally, this paper will assert that Featherstone (1991) and Laermans (1993) were correct in claiming that Baudrillardian sign consumption did indeed flourish in the 19th century and a result our conceptions of when contemporary consumer culture first emerged need to be reconsidered. The content of this paper is divided into two components. The first section of this paper will chart the evolution of visual merchandising techniques. In this segment the history of visual merchandising from its earlier incarnations in small boutique store, through the manipulation of iron and glass in the arcades, and the wild excess of the world expositions, through to the strategic yet audacious efforts of the grand emporiums will be examined. Overall, this first section will demonstrate that the 19th-century department stores' techniques of visual display were an amalgamation of a long historical process, where specific techniques were taken, experimented with, and either embraced or rejected. The paper's second component will apply Baudrillard's (1996; 1998; 1981) concepts of commodity signs and sign consumption developed in his early works in an analysis of 19th-century visual merchandising techniques. It will be argued that that the grand emporiums' use of visual display was in fact a manipulation of three distinct types of sign-values, luxurious signs, exotic signs, and signs of excess. As such the merchandise of the 19th-century department stores was desired not for its form or function, or even because it had become fetishised, but rather for the symbolic values that the goods connoted. Thus, this paper will assert, through the careful deployment of commodities signs 19th-century consumers were

engaging in forms of postmodern sign-consumption in a period previously considered by sociologists to be the height of modernity.

The Evolution of Visual Merchandising

Contemporary techniques of visual merchandising began to evolve in retail establishments in the 18th century. In small boutiques the first tentative steps were taken to display goods openly to the public. Previously, retail outlets kept their visual display to a minimum (Laermans, 1993: 85). Shopkeepers cared little for the outward appearance of their stores and only rarely presented merchandise for consumers to view. Instead of displaying merchandise on fixtures retailers would, upon the customers' request, retrieve products hidden away inside cabinets or out of drawers. Under these conditions 'sales talk' became vital to the selling process, as the retailer relied on their ability to persuade the consumer that the merchandise in question was of excellent quality (Laermans, 1993: 85).

However, recently this version of the development of visual merchandising has been challenged. In contrast to Laermans (1993), Walsh (1999: 47-51) has called for a revision of retail history by claiming that sophisticated and extravagant techniques of visual merchandising existed in the 18th century. Yet, although Walsh's (1999) argument is quite persuasive a deeper analysis highlights two potential flaws. Firstly, Walsh's (1999: 46-71) work only examined a small number of London-based boutique stores whose retail practices may not have been indicative of general pattens (Hilton, 2000). Secondly, the validity of Walsh's (1999: 54) use of images from a small boutique store recorded in 1809 must be questioned. Walsh (1999) asserted that the image demonstrated that the merchandise of stores prior to the grand emporiums

was clearly displayed for customers to view. However, the image used by Walsh (1999: 54) depicted a store where every consumer pictured was stringently attended by a watchful salesperson. Here the merchandise is not freely available for the consumer to browse but instead produced only upon request. The images depicted in Walsh's (1999) work are far removed from the environment of free wandering and browsing encouraged later in the 19th-century department stores. Nevertheless, through a gradual evolution in retailing ideology the interior arrangement of stores and the deliberate displaying of goods became an integral tool for retail managers. During this period of change, stores were slowly transformed from cluttered and unattractive factory outlets to magnificent, exciting, and opulent shopping worlds, where goods were not just displayed but celebrated in an environment of glass, steel, and iron.

The second major step in the evolution of store design was the development of the arcades or *passages* predominantly in Europe during the first part of the 19th century (Benjamin, 1999). The arcades were covered streets or boulevards that can be traced historically to the exotic bazaars of Asia Minor and the Arabian Peninsula (Geist, 1983: 4-10). Yet, what made the European arcades of the 19th century critical to the development of store interiors were their experiments with iron and glass construction, which dramatically improved the aesthetic qualities of small boutique shops that they housed. The central features of the arcades were their glass skylights, which in their most spectacular form covered the entire length of the passage. Although incredibly expensive and fraught with technical difficulties (MacKeith, 1986: 80-90), the glass skylights provided the arcades with a fully enclosed, comfortable shopping space and a very beautiful, even dazzling consumption site

(Benjamin, 1999). However despite the incredible adornments outside the visual delights presented by the arcades did not extend into the boutiques that they contained. In most cases the internal arrangements of the stores progressed little from earlier incarnations (MacKeith, 1986: 90–92). As such, the arcades became more associated with the strolling observer, the *flaneur*, a figure made famous in the writings of French poet Charles Baudelaire (Benjamin, 1989).

The third advance in visual merchandising occurred following the establishment of Grand Expositions, which began with the Crystal Palace exposition of London in 1851. Although originally intended to demonstrate new technology, the expositions soon became huge fairs, where goods were exhibited in elaborate and often exotic surroundings (Williams, 1982: 59). The sensory bombardment that became the hallmark of expositions commenced as soon as the public approached the expositions' huge entrances. As an account of the 1885 Paris exposition contained in Benjamin's (1999: 188–189 G8a, 2) *Arcades Project* demonstrated, the entrances to the expositions were spectacular and dramatic,

> 'Four locomotives were guarding the halls of machines, like those great bulls of Nineveh, or like the sphinxes to be seen at the entrance to Egyptian temples. This hall was a land of iron and fire and water; the ears were deafened, the eyes dazzled.'

Inside the gates of the exposition the sensory delights continued with monuments, fountains, and marble statues lining the exposition floor's interior (Benjamin, 1999: 176 – 177 G2a, 7). Vendors' displays were often themed on distant and exotic lands. For example, the 1867 exposition held in Paris featured a 'replica' Egyptian temple and a Moroccan pergola, while the 1899 exposition contained a replica of a Cairo street complete with obligatory belly dancers (Williams, 1982: 61). The diversity and

chaos of exhibits that confronted consumers was displayed when Williams (1982: 61) quoted a journalist and social critic of the time, Maurice Talmeyr,

> '[The Grand Exposition's contained] Hindu temples, savage huts, pagodas, souks, Algerian alleys, Chinese, Japanese, Sudanese, Sengalese, Siamese, Cambodian quarters… a bazaar of climates, architectural styles, smells, colours, cuisine, [and] music…'

However, even most significantly, the retailers of the expositions learned that sales were increased when their products were openly and strategically displayed to the public. As an unnamed writer[3] in Benjamin's (1999: 195–196 G13, 1) *Arcades Project* remarked,

> 'A fundamental rule, quickly learned through observation, is that no object should be placed directly on the floor, on a level with the walkways. Pianos, furniture, physical apparatus, and machines are better displayed on a pedestal or raised platform. The best exhibits make use of two quite distinct systems: display under glass or open display.'

The idea of placing goods where people could view them easily was a major innovation in the development of visual merchandising because it placed an emphasis on the staging of goods in extravagant and exciting displays to increase the appeal of the merchandise. Following the developments of the expositions consumers expected to be presented with a bounty of visual pleasures every time they entered a retail outlet. For consumers, stores now had to stimulate and excite them as well as provide the basic necessities for life.

Finally, while visual merchandising may not have been an invention of the 19th-century department stores, the grand emporiums embraced the idea of staging goods in luxurious and astonishing environments like no other retail institution.

Moreover, the early department stores did not just copy previous techniques from the dry goods stores, arcades, and expositions, but instead transformed the concept of visual merchandising in four distinct ways making the display of merchandise one of the most integral components of the shopping experience.

Firstly, the early department stores made the techniques of visual display introduced by the World Expositions a normal part of shopping. Although incredible, the World Expositions were irregular events, only occurring every few years in a handful of major metropolises across Europe and later in the United States. In contrast, the grand emporiums operated virtually every day of the year, only stopping for religious holidays. Following the evolution of the early department stores, consumers experienced the sensory delights found in the exposition every time they went shopping. While still remaining a fabulous and astonishing experience, shopping in the fantastic world created by the early department stores became the normal form of consumption for many people in the 19th century.

Secondly, the early department stores used incredible and luxurious store interiors that exceeded those of even the most opulent arcade. Like the arcades before them, the 19th-century department stores created an extraordinary consumption site by experimenting with glass roofing, creating unusual effects with natural light, and incorporating the 'outdoors in the indoors' (Hendrickson, 1979: 37). The experiments in glass and iron construction created a truly amazing consumption space, as Miller (1981: 167) described in the case of Paris' *Bon Marche,*

> 'The iron columns and expanse of glass provided a sense of space, openness and light. Immense gallery opened upon immense gallery, and along the upper floors ran balconies from which one could view, as a spectator the crowds and activity below.'

As well as providing a spectacular setting, the frequently used gallery design encouraged consumers to the department stores' higher levels (Benson, 1979: 203). The impression of luxury was arguably the true hallmark of the 19th-century department store. Everything, it seemed, from balconies, doorknobs, and staircase banisters, to the store's walls was adorned with intricate designs and pattens (Artley, 1975: 29, 42, 50-57). Huge chandeliers hung from the ceiling, while marble tiles or oriental carpets often covered the floor (Benson, 1979: 202; Artley, 1975: 38-39). The early retail giants presented a stately and even regal image, as a statement by one observer, recorded by Williams (1982: 93), demonstrated,

> 'On entering Durayel's store by the principle door, it seems as though you are entering a palace rather than a shop.'

Indeed, Miller (1981: 168) in describing the interior of the *Bon Marche*, provided a more detailed account of the opulence of the stores,

> 'Everywhere merchandise formed a decorative motif conveying an exceptional quality to the goods themselves. Silks cascaded from the walls of the silk gallery, ribbons were strung above the halls of ribbons, umbrellas were draped full blown in a parade of hues and designs. Oriental rugs, rich and textural, hung from balconies for the spectators below.'

Although authors like Williams (1982: 71) have questioned the authenticity of the luxurious materials used by the early department stores, the overall effect achieved by the grand emporiums remained unchanged. Even if the materials used in the grand emporiums were fakes, the mahogany, marble, carpets, artworks, and the overall

interior of the department stores gave the 19th-century department stores a sensation of luxury that consumers were happy to believe in.

Thirdly, the 19th-century department stores perfected the use of chaotic and excessive displays of merchandise. Managers of the early department stores would often present of goods in unorganised and chaotic piles on tables and across fixtures (Laermans, 1993: 91), while unrelated merchandise were also stacked together (Sennett, 1977: 144). Moreover, in an act that at first seems counterproductive, the *Bon Marche's* owner Aristide Boucicaut is said to have enjoyed 'hiding' popular goods in unexpected departments to encourage shoppers to search the entire width and breadth of his gigantic store to find the products that they desired (Miller, 1981: 168). Another technique employed by the emporiums was to display of goods in incredible volumes. As Miller (1981: 168) wrote,

> 'Merchandise heaped merchandise was a sight all its own. Bargain counters outside entryways produced a crush at the doors that attracted still larger crowds… inside the spectacle of flowing crowds intensified, orchestrated by barred passages, by cheap, tempting goods on the first floor…'

By presenting commodities in massive quantities, department storeowners like Boucicaut and Wanamaker indicated to consumers that the emporiums' supplies were virtually endless.

Finally, the 19th-century department stores continued and refined the use of special and often exotic themed displays, which had originally been employed in the World Expositions. In many cases, the merchandise of the 19th-century department stores was not simply presented to potential consumers on fixtures (Artley, 1975: 33-36). Instead, the emporiums' goods were grouped together in 'real' scenes. For example, a

saucepan would not be displayed on its own, but placed within a context by exhibiting it in a replica kitchen complete with a mannequin family (Laermans, 1993: 91). Additionally, the 19th-century department stores perfected the more extravagant merchandising technique of staging goods in exotic surroundings. Some of the early department stores' favourite themes included representations of Ancient Arabia, Egyptian tombs, and for American stores, Parisian themed rooms (Laermans, 1993: 91). Even more unusual experiments in exotic themes included Japanese gardens (Laermans, 1993: 91) and scenes from the North Pole (Miller, 1981: 169). However, perhaps the most impressive themed display conducted by any of the 19th-century department stores was the *Bon Marche's* legendary 'white sales'. In these understandably infrequent events, the entire store was festooned in white. All merchandise that was not white was temporarily removed and as Miller (1981: 169) explained, replaced by,

> 'White sheets, white towels, white curtains, white flowers, *ad infinitum*, all forming a single *blanc* motif that covered even stairways and balconies.'

This incredible experiment in visual merchandising was made all more dramatic when, just 50 years before, most merchants would have balked at the simple idea of displaying goods in a cabinet. The transformation in store architecture and merchandising, which had been initialised by the arcades and World Expositions and expanded by the early department stores, changed consumption into a visual pursuit. After the evolution in store design, shopping was no longer a verbal engagement between merchants and customers contesting the value and quality of goods. Instead, buying was transformed into a sensory experience and became an entirely new social practice. Indeed, it is reasonable to assert that the advances in store architecture and

visual merchandising that occurred in the 19th-century department store transformed, to paraphrase Marx (1990), the 'means of consumption'.

Visual Merchandising and the Retailing of Commodity-Signs in the 19th-century Department Store

In his early publications, Baudrillard (1981; 1996; 1998) attempted to construct a new perspective of mass consumption, one that countered the primacy of production found in Marx (1990) and instead incorporated the principles of semiotics first used by Ferdinand de Saussure (1959) and later developed by Roland Barthes (1979) (Poster, 1988: 1-3). Baudrillard contended that the concepts of use-value and exchange-value (Marx, 1990) were outdated, as they ignored the symbolic qualities of an object that determined the worth of a commodity, a value Baudrillard called a 'sign-value'. Baudrillard (1981; 1996; 1998) extended Barthes' (1979) analysis of the symbolic qualities of 'things' by arguing that the semiotic characteristics of goods transferred directly into the calculation of their value. For Baudrillard (1981; 1996; 1998), goods were not consumed because of their value as utilities but because of their desirable symbolic attributes. As Kellner (1994: 4) described, products were instead,

> 'Bought and displayed as much for their sign-value as their use-value, and the phenomena of sign-value became an essential constituent of the commodity and consumption in the consumer society.'

In line with his Marxist origins, Baudrillard (1981; 1996; 1998) regarded the sign-value of commodities as a construction of capitalism. Although capitalist techniques of mass-production was very good at making identical products at great

volume, economies of scale were less efficient producing unique and therefore desirable goods (Kellner, 1994: 3). In order to overcome the problem of creating unique merchandise, Baudrillard (1996: 164) argued that capitalism exploited forms of advertising (of which visual merchandising is an important element) to construct symbolic virtues for their products. Through advertising, commodities became expressive, communicating ideas about themselves and their owners (Poster, 1988: 2). For Baudrillard, in this new capitalist system, a product's utility was unimportant. Indeed, Baudrillard (1996: 200) argued, that for a product to be consumed it first needed to be transformed into a sign. As such, consumption was not a procurement and use of commodities but rather, as Baudrillard (1996: 200) famously proclaimed,

> 'An activity consisting of the systematic manipulation of signs.'

According to Baudrillard, changing the advertisement's discourse transformed the sign-value of a commodity. As Baudrillard (1996: 165) stated, the object of consumption, the commodity-sign, was fundamentally a manipulation of advertising,

> 'Since its function is almost entirely secondary, and since both image and discourse play largely allegorical roles in it, advertising supplies us with the ideal object and casts a particularly revealing light upon the system of objects. And since, like all heavily connoted systems, it is self-referential, we may safely rely on advertising to tell us what it is that we consume through objects.'

For Baudrillard then, consumption as a manipulation of signs involved a quest for manufactured desires constructed entirely by the code of advertising (Porter, 1993: 2). Form and function were reduced to secondary concerns as marketing created the meaning and values of consumer goods. The 'system of objects' that Baudrillard (1996) spoke of did not involve the exchange and operation of useful material things but rather a system of signs, connotation, and decoding.

Although Baudrillard (1981; 1996; 1998) argued that the manipulation of sign-value was a construction of industrial capitalism, he failed to pinpoint the exact origins of the exploitation of signs in the consumer society. With the exception of Featherstone (1991) and Laermans (1993) most sociologists have generally assumed that Baudrillard believed that consumption as a 'systematic manipulation of signs' first occurred around the 1920s (Kellner, 1994: 3), a time when advertising and recognisable brand names became prevalent (Ewen, 1976; 1988; 1996). However, Baudrillard (1996: 199) was careful not to backdate the origins of commodity signs too far, as he stated in *The System of Objects*,

> 'From time immemorial people have bought, possessed, enjoyed and spent, but this does not mean that they were 'consuming'. The festivals of 'primitive' [sic] peoples, the largesse of the feudal lord, the luxury of the nineteenth-century bourgeois – none of these amounted to consumption.'

However, this section will argue that Baudrillard underestimated how long systems of sign-value had existed in consumer capitalism. Indeed, it will be asserted that exploitations of sign-value were an essential component of retail capitalism as early as the 1850s, with the 19th-century department stores' manipulation of visual display being the key contributor.

Applying Baudrillard's (1981; 1996; 1998) theories of commodity signs to the 19th-century department store, the exploitation of visual merchandising by department store managers can be viewed fundamentally as the manipulation of sign-values. In the grand emporiums people purchased goods as signs. Indeed, it could be asserted that the patrons of the 19th-century department stores consumed the exotic and luxurious surroundings that housed the commodities rather than the goods themselves. For example, a pot staged in an exotic Moroccan scene described by Sennett (1977:

145) was not desired because it was well made or even aesthetically appealing. The utility of the pot was relatively inconsequential; what made the pot desirable was the commodity's sign-value. The pot's sign-value was derived from its advertising and in particular, its visual merchandising in exotic surroundings. The Moroccan scene and the attached symbolic connotations of the exotic and of mystery directly transferred into the sign-values of the pots. The pots staged in the department store ceased to be ordinary products and were transformed into desirable commodity-signs. Nevertheless, that is not to say that systems of exchange-value and the resulting fetishism of commodities described by Benjamin (1999) and Sennett (1977) did not occur in the 19th-century department store. Indeed, the manipulation of visual display conducted by the 19th-century department store's managers did remove products from the 'truth' of their exploitative productive origins. However, the neo-Marxist interpretation provided by authors such as Benjamin (1999) and Sennett (1977) only provided half the story, as they failed to recognise that the 19th-century department stores also gave their goods new sign or symbolic identities.

The techniques of visual display used by the 19th-century department stores exploited three major types of sign-values. These three sign-values, luxury, exoticism, and abundance corresponded with the various forms of visual displays employed by the 19th-century department store managers. Firstly, the early department stores exploited signs of wealth and luxury. The grand emporiums use of ornately gilded columns, staircases, and banisters, thick carpets and fine marble, and vast quantities of polished wood and stained glass (Artley, 1975) gave their goods a symbolic lustre. The appearance of luxury that adorned every huge gallery of the 19th-century department store flowed into their products. Ordinary, everyday commodities reflected in their

opulent surroundings became signs of wealth and affluence. For example, a boltof inexpensive cloth could absorb the symbolic values of the finely carved oak table on which it was displayed. In these conditions, the otherwise mundane cloth would become valued because of the association with luxury derived directly from its staged environment. Effectively, despite possessing little tangible value the cloth in question became a *sign* of affluence and opulence. So successful were the early department stores' manipulations of symbolic wealth that the 19th-century novelist Emile Zola (1995) exclaimed that the grand emporiums had 'democratised luxury'. While Zola's (1995) ostentatious statement largely ignored the complex mechanisms of class and status that occurred in the 19th-century department stores[4] and has been criticised by most commentators including Benson (1986: 76-78), Lancaster (1995: 28-31), Miller (1981: 178), and Williams (1982: 97-101), Zola (1995) recognised that *symbolically*, if not in actual material reality, the proletariat could enjoy a taste of a bourgeois lifestyle. Indeed, the images depicted in Artley (1975: 14, 16, 18 38, 39, 56, 65) are not of small boutique stores that would cater only for the elites but rather gigantic buildings that would be filled with thronging masses from almost all social classes and statuses. In these incredible environments, with their massive galleries; chandeliers; ornate cornices; fountains; and pillars (Artley, 1975: 14, 18, 38, 65), commodities became signs of wealth, opulence, and luxury through association. Through the manipulation of visual display the department stores did not sell 'real' luxury items but products that represented the idea of luxury.

Secondly, the early department stores manipulated signs of the exotic. By staging their goods in mock Japanese Gardens, Moroccan Harems, Byzantine Bazaars, or any other unusual foreign arrangement, the 19th-century department stores conferred onto

normal goods the symbolic qualities of the exotic locations represented. Just as luxurious visual merchandising connoted the sign-values of wealth and affluence, the 19th-century department stores' staging of goods in exotic surroundings connoted sign-values of mystery, glamour, and eroticism. As Corbey (1993: 340) has noted, during the 19th century possession of exotic artefacts became a valued fashion item. Items from the Orient, Near East, and 'Darkest' Africa were viewed as objects of desire, symbols of power, influence, and even eroticism. However, 'real' exotic artefacts, those that actually came from distant lands, were incredibly expensive. Nevertheless, through the exploitation of visual display, mundane products that most people could afford were transformed into exotic and desirable commodity signs. As such, when consumers purchased goods from an exotic display they were in fact buying part of that display; the symbolic representations of the exotic and all that it connoted. For example, in Zola's *The Ladies' Paradise*[5] (1995: 116), the consumers described were enthused by the exotic sign-values of the rugs in their symbolically charged environment, the oriental hall of the *Bonheur des Dames*. It was the idea of the harem and the excitement of far away places that drew the consumers to the goods on display. However, once again the sign characteristics of the goods displayed were not 'real' or natural. If a product was not selling in a particular themed area it could be moved to a different 'stage', thus transforming the commodities' exotic sign-values. Yet, for consumers in the 19th-century department stores, the exotic commodity signs were real in the pragmatic sense that they believed them to be real. It was inconsequential whether the product as a material entity was exotic; the product was consumed not as a material entity but as a sign and as such possessed genuine symbolic values of the exotic, derived from the product's visual merchandising.

Finally, by staging goods in a disorganised and chaotic manner the grand emporiums manipulated signs of excess. In a society where scarcity and shortage were still genuine threats to large segments of the population (Zola, 1995: 8-17), the display by the early department stores of a near-infinite profusion of goods provided symbolic connotations of surplus. The orchestrated chaos and the seemingly random allocation of great volumes of goods demonstrated the idea that the commodities displayed were inexhaustible. As Baudrillard (1998: 26) explains, manipulations of symbolic of excess can be as particularly powerful tool for the owners of consumption spaces,

> 'The displays of delicacies, and all the scenes of alimentary and vestimentary festivity, stimulate a magical salivation. Accumulation is more than the sum of its products: the conspicuousness of surplus, the final and magical negation of scarcity, and the maternal and luxurious presumptions of the land of milk and honey.'

In a symbolic sense, even when buying only a single item, a consumer in the early department stores purchased part of the grander display. In acquiring a fraction of the total display, patrons were in fact consuming the signified values of abundance, prosperity, and plenty. Baudrillard's (1998: 26) discussion of contemporary super-markets seemed equally applicable to the 19th-century department store when he wrote,

> 'By purchasing a portion one in effect appropriates a whole crumbling pyramid of oysters, meats, pears or canned asparagus. You buy the part for the whole. And this metonymic, repetitive discourse of consumable matter, of the *commodity*, becomes once again, through a great collective metaphor – by virtue of its very excess – the image of the *gift*, and of that inexhaustible and spectacular prodigality which characterizes the *feast*.'

The premeditated chaos, to use an appropriate oxymoron, of goods heaped upon goods represented for consumers the potential to purchase more, to spend more, and

to desire more. In their exploitation of chaotic signs, the early department stores asserted that the possibilities for consumption were both infinite and unattainable. The display of goods on mass symbolically devalued each individual item. Obtaining a single item was not enough because there were always more desirable items next to, above, under, and even on top of the original object of desire. Once again, Artley (1975: 22-23) provided an excellent example of the early department stores' manipulation of signs of excess with a photograph of the china and glass department of the Charles, Jenner and Company store. The department depicted in Artley's (1975: 22-23) book was lined from wall to wall with varied types of ceramics and glass merchandise displayed in cabinets, on tables, or on stands. Upon entering the department, the consumer was confronted with an overwhelming array of possible purchases. The manipulation of the chaotic signified that the commodities displayed were only part of a never-ending gamut of potential goods. By staging products in great volumes and disorder the early department store managers ensured that the desires of consumers could never be fulfilled and thus shoppers would continue to return to the stores.

Much more than in previous retail institutions, the goods sold in early department stores were vaunted not for their quality, function, or even beauty, but rather for what the commodities represented, the ascribed symbolic values of wealth, affluence, status, mystery, romance, and the multitude of other sign-values that could be read from the commodity-signs. As Simmel (1990; 1997) and Veblen (1994: 70) recognised as early as the turn of the century, consumers in the 19th century deployed products to express their individuality and denote their social status and position. At a time when modernity threatened to make people mere replicas of each other (Simmel,

1997), the expressive, symbolically infused goods of the 19th-century department stores provided an opportunity to obtain distinction. Finally, it worth noting that the real strength of the 19th-century department stores techniques of visual merchandising was derived from the way the symbolic values of luxury, the exotic, and chaos worked together. The visual displays in the early department stores did not utilise signs of affluence, the 'orient', and surplus independently but combined them, making the commodities polysemic, that is, desirable for many symbolic attributes at the one time. Although it is unclear how intended the results were, the exploitation of visual merchandising by the 19th-century department stores made the emporiums houses of signs.

Conclusion

The techniques of visual display used by the 19th-century department stores created forms of contemporary-style sign-consumption in the 19th century. "The claim made by this paper, that the grand emporiums' manipulation of visual display was actually a manipulation of sign-values, results in Baudrillard's (1981; 1996; 1998) theories of sign-consumption occuring at least eighty years before he acknowledged." Although both Laermans (1993: 94), and Featherstone (1991: 101) have previously suggested that systems of commodity-signs had been in operation in the 19th-century their initial acknowledgment have been extended through a detailed account of how the signified values of luxury, the exotic, and surplus were transferred onto the 19th-century department stores' products. The grand emporium's merchandise was not purchased for its use-value; vaunted for its function, purpose, or even for its aesthetic qualities. Instead, this paper contends that the commodities sold in the 19th-century department store were consumed as signs, expressive symbolic goods that derived their

significance from the representations of opulence, mystery, or affluence contained in their staged environment.

For some theorists, like Fredric Jameson (1991), the consumption of signs is an attribute particularly characteristic of postmodern or late capitalist societies (Featherstone, 1991: 52-56). As Featherstone (1991: 15) wrote,

> 'He (Jameson) also sees postmodern culture as the culture of the consumer society, the post-World War Two stage of late capitalism. In this society culture is given a new significance through the saturation of signs and messages… '

Even for Baudrillard (1981; 1996; 1998), a theorist who rejects notions of postmodernity, sign-consumption appears to belong to the 'new' form of existence, the abstract transcendental world of mass-media, free flowing signifiers, simulation, and hyper-reality, described so dramatically in his later works like *Simulations* (1983) and *America* (1988). However, this paper has suggested that a sophisticated form of sign-consumption existed in the consumer paradises of the 19th century, a time and place considered to be the pinnacle of the historical epoch known as modernity. In this way, it shares the views of Featherstone (1991: 24), that even if a cultural divide can be distinguished between modern and postmodern eras, then the strong similarities and continuities that connect modernity and postmodernity must be acknowledged. Consumption as a social and symbolic exercise must be recognised as a continuance of long standing practices. A closer inspection of contemporary stores would demonstrate that many of the original techniques employed by the department store's patriarchs have not changed. Sign-Consumption, then as now, operates by selling connotations of luxury, exoticism, and excess. Regarding sign-consumption

consumption as exclusive to contemporary or postmodern times demonstrates a naivety to history and an underestimation of the ingenuousness and capacity of the people of the 19th century.

Moreover, this paper has suggested that by consuming the commodity-signs retailed by the 19th-century department stores, shoppers in the 19th century engaged in an activity now referred to by the sociology of consumption as 'lifestyle consumption'. Consumers in the 19th century used the expressive, symbolic goods of the early department stores to construct both a social and self-identity. The emporium's merchandise representing the values of mystery, glamour, opulence, and erotica were deployed as cultural and social markers to indicate taste, status, and style, in the same way as contemporary consumers denote desirable characteristics using emblematic commodities like cars, jeans, or coffee. Nevertheless, despite the observations of Simmel (1990; 1997) and Veblen (1994), many contemporary sociologists of consumption have tended to regard the notion of lifestyle consumption as a new phenomenon, which developed following the introduction of post-Fordist production (Lash and Urry, 1994). However, a perspective that links the construction of identity to the availability of a multiplicity of consumer goods ignores the role that symbolic values play in lifestyle consumption. In the case of the 19th-century department store, consumers did not need a wide range of different products, styles, types and forms to engage in lifestyle consumption, instead, 19th-century consumers purchased merchandise with the imbedded sign-values of wealth, exotica, and excess to construct a social persona.

In analysing the techniques of visual merchandising used by the 19th-century department store, this paper has been careful to avoid the extreme perspectives found in some previous accounts of 19th-century consumption. On one hand, it has refused to completely denounce the emporiums' use of visual merchandising as a calculated and immoral exploitation of consumers, as the critical works of Benjamin (1999), Sennett (1977), Williams (1982), Reekie (1993), and Bowlby (1985) have tended to do. While on the other, it has also rejected the view of some business historians (Pasdermadjian, 1954: 158) who were inclined to celebrate the genius of visual merchandisers and store owners for constructing a consumer paradise, where all could acquire their dreams and aspirations. Instead, a more moderate approach in analysing the 19th-century department stores' use of visual merchandising has been taken. Although terms like exploitation and manipulation have been frequently used to describe the techniques employed by the grand emporiums, these terms have not been selected to cast political or moral aspersions but rather to indicate that the sign-values of wealth, exotica, and affluence attributed to commodities were not natural.

The first half of this paper detailed the development of visual merchandising in the 19th century from the first tentative experiments in small boutique stores to the extravagant and extraordinary staged displays of the grand emporiums. It was argued that the techniques of visual merchandising employed in the 19th-century department store was not original to the emporiums, but were instead, the culmination of a long and complex evolution. The paper's second half used the early of work of Baudrillard (1981; 1996; 1998) on sign-consumption to explore the manipulation of visual merchandising conducted by the managers of the 19th-century department stores. After detailing Baudrillard's (1981; 1996; 1998) theories of sign-value, it was asserted

that the staging of goods in extraordinary visual displays by the mangers of the grand emporiums transformed mundane everyday products into highly desirable luxurious, exotic, and excessive commodity-signs. By applying Baudrillard's (1981; 1996; 1998) symbolic perspective to consumption practices in the 19th-century department store, this section challenged the popular critical perspective (Benjamin, 1999; Sennett, 1977; Williams, 1982; Rappaport, 1996; Bowlby, 1985; Benson, 1979; Reekie, 1993) and instead asserted that by consuming commodities based on their expressive, symbolic worth, shoppers in the 19th-century department stores were engaging in constructive forms of contemporary and even postmodern lifestyle and identity construction.

Footnotes

[1] This project would not have been possible without the support and assistance of others. In particular, I would like to thank Mark Bahnisch, Ian Woodward, and Gavin Kendall for their comments and insights, my partner and family for their continuing support, and my colleagues at the Centre for Social Change Research, Queensland University of Technology.

[2] For a detailed analysis of Benjamin's contribution to consumption theory see Buck Morss (1991) and Gilloch (1996; 2002).

3 Benjamin (1999: 195-196) listed the reference for his quotation as, '*Exposition universelle de 1867, a Paris: Album des installations les plus remarquables del 'Exposition de 1862, a Londres, publie par la commission imperiale pour servir de renseignement aux exposants des diverses nations* (Paris, 1866) p. 5'

4 Zola (1995) was aware that despite the emporiums' alleged 'democratising of luxury' class barriers were still a major force in the grand emporiums. The plot of his novel concerned the difficulties for a poor peasant girl, Denise, who after moving to Paris in search of work, becomes employed at a Parisian department store and fell in love with the store's owner, Octave Mouret.

5 Zola's (1995) fictional work was based on large periods of observational research in Paris' department stores including the infamous *Bon Marche*.

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